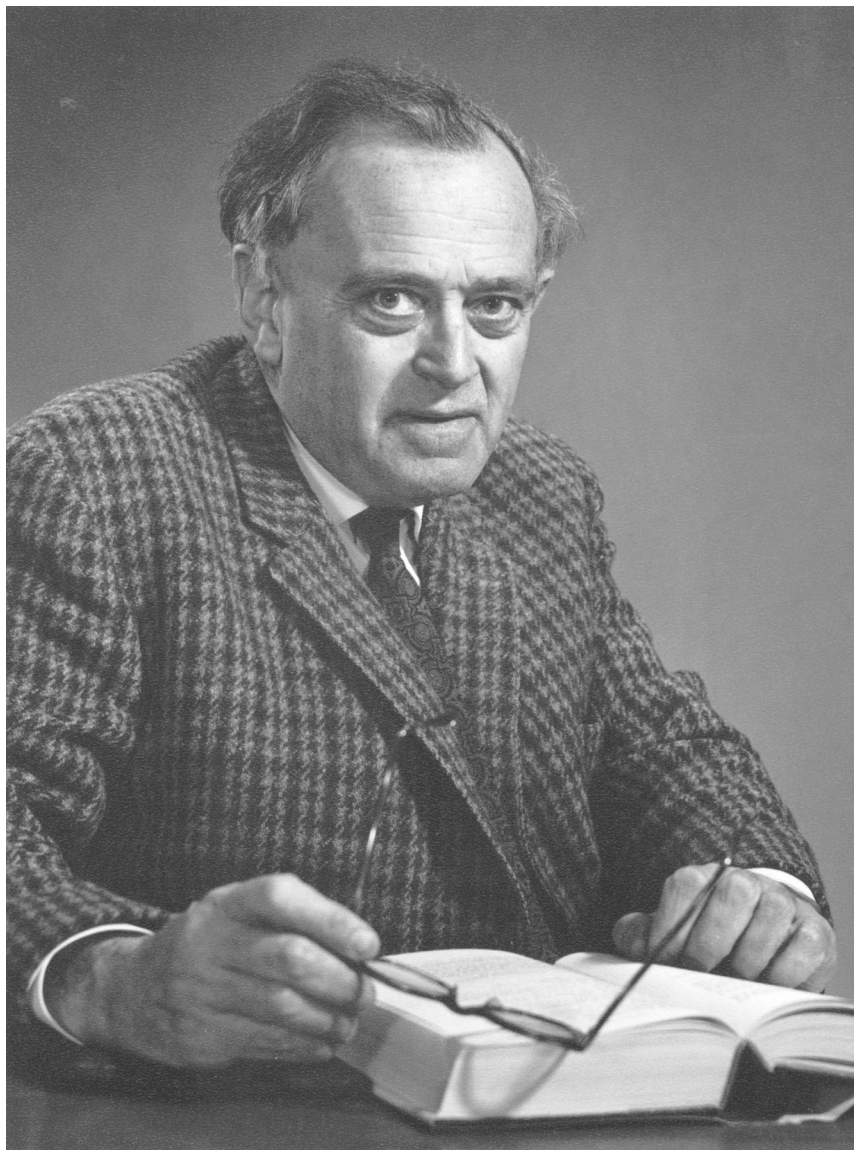

DONALD MACKINNON *Laird Parker*

Donald MacKenzie MacKinnon 1913–1994

IN A MOMENT OF INSPIRED JUDGEMENT — which is not the unvarying characteristic of academic committees — the Electors to the Norris-Hulse Chair of Divinity in the University of Cambridge invited Donald MacKinnon to move from the Regius Chair of Moral Philosophy in the University of Aberdeen to the Faculty of Divinity in Cambridge. The Fellows of Corpus Christi College shared the wisdom of the Electors, and MacKinnon joined the fellowship in 1960.

The Cambridge Faculty of Divinity at that time included Geoffrey Lampe and C. F. D. Moule, matched in stature in Moral Sciences by the elusive genius of John Wisdom. There was also a vibrancy and vigour in public debate on matters of faith and ethics. The rigour of the terms in which the debate was carried on was much enhanced by the powerful contributions of the new Norris-Hulse Professor. The Cambridge Faculty of Theology Lecture series were astonishingly successful, both as delivered to large attentive audiences, and in the published form of books such as *Objections to Christian Belief*. For good or for ill, much that has happened within the churches in this country, and to the place of theology within them can be traced back to that projection by the Cambridge Faculty of academic and scholarly debate into the public arena.

I start here for two reasons: the first is to underline the point that Donald MacKinnon was a theologian and philosopher whose engagement with those disciplines was a matter of mind and heart and soul. He did not have the detachment of the middle-aged Hume which allowed the latter his own self-created myth of testing the boundaries of scepticism from 6 a.m. till noon and turning easily to the distractions of backgammon in the evening. MacKinnon's probing of the boundaries of belief was an imperative of his own engagement with belief rather than an academic or pedagogic exercise. The second reason is that there is a sense in which a great deal of MacKinnon's intellectual

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development can be seen as a preparation for the Cambridge which he—a layman and a philosopher appointed to a senior Chair of Divinity—found in 1960.

None of this is to imply 'all intellectual work and no play', for this particular Jack was anything but dull. The intellectual seriousness made the wit, the smile (which unrolled from the eyes upward to the forehead and then downwards to the mouth), and the shared delight in academic gossip all the richer as part of the greater harmony. The *persona* was of course grand and at times eccentric, but what held the respective audiences entranced was the combination of intellectual passion and the spirit of enquiry which is in constant tension with truth and reality. The pressures which this produced were often concealed from others, but never from his wife Lois to whom therefore his colleagues and his pupils owe so much.

Donald MacKinnon was born on 27 August 1913 in Oban, Scotland. He was always pleased to be thought of as a highlander, and although by no means a political nationalist was sharply conscious of much that makes Scotland culturally different from England. However, not one to be pigeon-holed in this or other contexts, he was tendentiously capable of substituting 'North Britain' for 'Scotland' should there be more hot air than that particular balloon could stand. He was an only child and his father held the significant and distinctive position of Procurator Fiscal for Argyll. The wider family is still involved in the practice of law in Oban and the West Highlands. That area of Scotland clearly remained 'home' for him, for he and his wife kept a cottage, Tigh Grianach, near Oban, for many years until his eventual retirement to Aberdeen in 1978. Living strands of these roots are to be found in the regard with which he was held by fellow highlanders as diverse in interests as the Gaelic poets Sorley MacLean and Ian Crichton Smith on the one hand, and the former Lord Chancellor, Lord MacKay of Clashfern, on the other.

His early schooling at Cargilfield School, Edinburgh was followed by a scholarship to Winchester. He always spoke warmly of his time at Winchester, where the atmosphere of intellectual challenge and freedom which he found suited his talents well. It was during his schooldays that he became a communicant member of the Anglican Church. The importance of this for MacKinnon was very great indeed in a whole variety of ways. Most significantly, though perhaps most unobtrusively, it gave him a liturgical discipline which was the context of most of his intellectual work. It is arguable that the more austere patterns of worship in the Church of Scotland might not have served him equally well. On the other hand, his membership of the Anglican communion was held within the Scottish Episcopal Church. Being in that specific sense outside the Established Church be it of Scotland or England brought its own perspectives upon which he remarked from time to time. Earlier *Who's Who*

entries used mischievously to allude to this by listing under the heading *Clubs* 'the Scottish Episcopal Church' and 'the Labour Party'.

His education continued as a scholar of New College, Oxford, and early success came with the award of the John Locke Scholarship, which appropriately, albeit accidentally, marks well one key strand of his thinking. He attached great importance to Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities, seeing there early insistence upon the attachment of an empiricist epistemology to a realist ontology. For all the attractions of forms of idealism, whether in metaphysics, ethics or even the philosophy of history, an engagement with the world experienced in empirical form lay very near the core of MacKinnon's approach to both philosophical and theological questions. For example, he remained an admirer of H. H. Price whom he invited to deliver the highly successful series of Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen, which were in due course published as *Belief*. Equally he was known to comment on Collingwood whom he much admired, that, nonetheless, Collingwood's work on the empirical remains of Roman antiquity, was an indirect counterweight to his seminal but idealistically inclined *Idea of History*.

(This empirically inclined perspective on the philosophy of history informed MacKinnon's later engagement with the theological implications of the later dominance of Bultmann's theology over New Testament scholarship, and I shall return to this issue in due course.) Following Greats and further theological study, MacKinnon spent a year as an Assistant Lecturer in Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh (1936–7). It is typical of his own way of marking out his intellectual tributes as well as debts that he always referred to this post as 'Assistant to A. E. Taylor'.

Within the year he was recalled to Oxford to a Fellowship at Keble where he taught an extraordinary number of the generation of philosophers who dominated British philosophy in the second half of this century. Each, doubtless have their own impressions of him, as he had of them. He recounted, for example the story of one student, who arrived in Oxford in the later years of the war. The student in question, who in later life held senior positions in the British academic firmament, had through his family history a more direct understanding of the impact of war in mainland Europe than most of his teachers. His approach to writing philosophy tutorial papers belligerently rejected the conventions of Oxford of that time. He was passed from tutor to tutor in the hope that some intellectual modus vivendi might be found. Eventually Donald was asked to take him on. After reading the first essay submitted, Donald avoided the trap of trying to do the impossible and chart a steady line in discussion from the student's starting point to the topic as set. He simply remarked how interesting the essay was, but that it could not be accepted as a contribution to the philosophical topic set and handed it back with a note of the subject for next week. Apparently the same limited engagement took place

for a further two tutorials. However, 'in the fourth week', as Donald recalled with evident excitement, 'he cracked, and produced a first class piece of work'. The student in question was Ernest Gellner.

Donald's kindness to students took many different forms and found its own manners of expression in Oxford, Aberdeen, and Cambridge. Professor Ronald Hepburn, for example, pays tribute to the risk which MacKinnon took in giving him an appointment as his Assistant after what MacKinnon referred to as 'an abortive year in Divinity', and before what was the usual route of an established record in graduate study. Others recount with astonishment his ability to recognise and recall personal details about students from distant years, sometimes briefly encountered, and to make a chance meeting in the street a sharing of common memories.

It was during his years at Keble that some of the many stories of his occasional unconventional behaviour took root. His eccentricities then, as later in Aberdeen and Cambridge, even by Oxbridge standards gave him an early and distinctive place in British intellectual life. Like many a good myth a grain of fact could occasionally be divined, but that was not the point. They represented how colleagues and students came to see and want to remember Donald MacKinnon. Basically, everybody remembers him and comes to believe that they were present on one or other of the occasions which give rise to the rich vein of MacKinnon folklore. The latter like each good *perikope* has several contenders for empirical origin. By changing the variables each story could transfer easily either forwards or backwards in time between Oxford, Aberdeen, and Cambridge. Thus one finds former Cabinet members, Peers of the Realm, school teachers, civil servants, parsons, doctors, Bishops, and captains of industry alike able—indeed eager—to share a common inheritance of MacKinnonia. The stories however are always told with affection and indeed respect, because whatever the level of conscious articulation, there was amongst the least philosophical, and even the most this-worldly, an awareness of intellectual and spiritual depth.

In 1947 MacKinnon accepted the Regius Chair in Moral Philosophy in the University of Aberdeen. It was in one sense a going home, a return to his native land. As with all such translations there was much gain but some losses. Intellectually the pattern of work was very different—large first year classes, in the Scottish tradition, and fewer honours and postgraduate students. The local community took him to their heart with the unostentatious acceptance, characteristic of the place, that Professors from Oxford might well be a bit different—some, of course, more different than others. The locals all knew him, from the waitress in the coffee shop in 1987 who recognised him from the daily morning queue in the baker shop thirty years before, to the newspaper delivery man whose respect and genuine fondness took him to Donald's funeral in 1994. My own first sighting of Donald MacKinnon is probably

not untypical. I went as an eleven-year-old boy to a packed 'Any Questions' type evening in the local church hall. One of the panel amongst the local worthies was this large shambling man who sat on the end of the panel in the second chair on the left of the chairman. He was introduced as 'Professor of Moral Philosophy' with slight stress on the word 'Moral'. During the evening he appeared to read a book, feel the need to count his pocket change several times, make copious notes to which he did not refer, sharpen a pencil with an open razor blade, but at the same time dominate the discussion by sheer intellectual power and engagement of the emotions. There was no doubt that this was the great MacKinnon, as even an unsophisticated eleven-year-old could tell.

The division of responsibilities required a teaching focus defined by the title of the Chair and in this respect, there was the loss of the wide teaching remit of an Oxford Tutor. The compensations, however, included the podium afforded by the first year moral philosophy class which included the few who would continue the study of philosophy for a further three years, but also the many (amounting even in those days to a further one hundred or so) who comprised the curious volunteers, the reluctant conscripts and possibly a few of the intellectually halt and lame. This was indeed a challenge and MacKinnon responded magnificently. The conscripts were enthralled, and the halt and the lame learned to exercise their intellectual talents in ways not thought possible.

His contribution to the intellectual life of the University and city also took significant indirect forms. One of the most remarkable of these was the array of seminal thinkers, in addition to H. H. Price, who in MacKinnon's time gave Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen—including, for example, Gabriel Marcel, John Wisdom, Michael Polanyi, and Paul Tillich.

During that period (1947 to 1960), which contained some darker moments, MacKinnon gave himself, perhaps too generously, to public presentations, to conferences, seminars, and meetings of a non-academic as well as professional academic nature. He was politically as well as ecclesiastically engaged. This is evident from papers and broadcasts of the time, as well as later publications which drew upon them, for example in his iconoclastic Gore Memorial Lecture in Westminster Abbey, *The Stripping of the Altars* (1968), and in his Boutwood Lectures in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, *Creon and Antigone: Ethical problems of Nuclear Warfare* (1981).

His central philosophical work of that period *A Study in Ethical Theory* (1957), provided an intellectual structure which defined at that time the position from which he carried out his duties as Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy. The book was reasonably well noticed by his peers and contemporaries, but there was not a natural location for it on the map of moral philosophy which was at the time being sketched out by Richard Hare and

others who were more directly influenced by the rather more constrained picture of the intellectual arena allowed by the aftermath of Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. The shape of the book was an evaluation of the contrasting consequences for ethical argument of utilitarian and Kantian approaches. As such the work had greater emphasis on historical perspectives than tended to be fashionable in the nineteen-fifties, although it was certainly a contribution to moral philosophy rather than the history of moral philosophy more narrowly defined. The elusive and now wholly successful final section dealing with the relation between religion and ethics was a forerunner to much, later, illumination. However, one most important legacy to be discerned in later writings is his respect for the Utilitarian insistence that human happiness cannot be wholly divorced from empirically describable states of affairs including social conditions. This grounding of our account of what is good in the empirical world, however, was tempered by his preoccupation with the Kantian emphasis that morality has ultimately to relate to what is good in itself, rather than be wholly preoccupied with what is a means to some further end.

The move to Cambridge brought with it congenial colleagues in the Faculty of Divinity to which he now belonged and for many who taught and enquired there over the next fifteen years at the centre of memory and intellectual formation lay the D Society. This met regularly in the MacKinnons' home in Parker Street and undoubtedly benefited as much from the informal discussion which followed over tea as from the more formal seminar which preceded that. Donald MacKinnon was of course in one of his natural elements on those Wednesday afternoons and although it was predictable that he would open the discussion after the paper, it was not equally predictable what form his contribution would take—be it anecdote, mischievous memory, a detailed critique based on seemingly vast multi-lingual reading, or an evident enthusiasm and admiration for a particularly fine academic *tour de force*. This last was not distributed lavishly but I particularly remember such a response to a paper by Mary Hesse. This illustrates well another of his characteristics—a capacity to appreciate to the full the creative use of expert knowledge and scholarship. This gave him what was then a less than wholly fashionable appreciation of the qualities of the type of scholarship and qualities of learning of those theologians whom he met through his regular invited participation in the Castelli Colloquia in Rome.

These were the qualities which he recognised in the scholarly work of, for example, Geoffrey Lampe, although he was equally enthusiastic about his joint authorship with Lampe of a series of articles brought together in 1966 in *The Resurrection*, a book with a readership much wider than the collectivity of professional theologians. This typifies the expression in Cambridge of his wish to see wider, but informed debate of the central elements of Christian belief. Over the years he had broadcast regularly on what was then called the Third

Programme, and some of his best contributions were reprinted along with his Gore Memorial Lecture in *The Stripping of the Altars* (1968), for example 'Authority and Freedom in the Church', 'Is Ecumenism a Power Game?', and 'The Controversial Bishop Bell'. His arrival in Cambridge preceded the publicity surrounding the publication of John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963), which achieved a degree of notoriety because John Robinson happened also to be the Bishop of Woolwich. There was much in that book which was commonplace in academic theology and which was more lightweight than Robinson's more considered writings on New Testament themes. However, although he was not above pointing this out, there is no doubt that MacKinnon relished this wider arena for theological discussion which Robinson had helped create. His most penetrating offering to this wider discussion was his contribution, 'Moral Objections', to the Cambridge lecture series and book *Objections to Christian Belief*. There was one clear sense in which he dominated Cambridge theology for the next decade or more: there were certainly those who expressed exasperation at his style, but there could be none there who were unaware of his intellectual presence.

A string of pupils and junior colleagues have moved to senior academic and ecclesiastical posts in the United Kingdom and overseas. His intellectual achievements are in part to be seen in the stimulus which, through them, he has given to the variety of fields in which they have chosen to work. The possibility of such second order influence, however, is always premised upon first order contributions and what is distinctive about Donald MacKinnon is the number of intellectual fronts upon which he advanced as it seemed, simultaneously.

There is a sense in which in any attempt to list or give separate mention to these is to dismember what in reality was a living whole. For example, his preoccupation with the debate between realism and anti-realism certainly took root in the fundamental questions of the nature and existence of God. Consideration of that, however, was linked to his exploration of Aristotle's views on Primary Substance, which in turn was of immense significance for his evaluation of the Christological debates of the first four centuries AD.

Likewise his often illustrated commitment to the importance of poet, playwright, and novelist in the European tradition of philosophical and theological reflection had wide ramifications. Thus Sophocles' Oedipus was a source of revelation and insight into the ethical and psychological character of self-knowledge, rather than simply a literary example of 'what oft was thought'. Nor was MacKinnon's treatment of Creon and Antigone in his Boutwood Lectures of 1981 anything less than an interweaving of the literary, the political, the moral, and the theological, in a probing meditation upon the implications of the nuclear deterrent.

The latter was an issue which had weighed upon him from the first

realisation of its implications. This gave an incisive edge to his participation in the wider discussion of political power and its basis. He deeply appreciated the invitation to deliver the fifth Martin Wight Memorial Lecture at the LSE, recalling as it did for him and others the stimulus and excitement of the group which Wight led and to which MacKinnon belonged in the 1960s, and which was the womb which gave birth to a volume of essays well-titled *Diplomatic Investigations*. His interest in the concept of as well as the exercise of power, played a significant part in his reflections upon the churches of his time, and he could be especially fierce in his distaste for ecclesiastical self-regard and the political dangers of allying an absolutist theology with secular power. Nonetheless, his disdain for what Caiaphas represented went hand in hand with an appreciation of the responsibilities of ecclesiastical as well as political office. Proximate to his consideration of these issues and underlying the particular thread which he wove through a series of inter-connected but different theological and philosophical questions, was his refusal to share any intellectually flawed dismissal of the problems associated with the concept of evil.

Whether in the discussion of the nature of political power, or of the relationship between moral and religious belief, in his preference for the concept of natural law, rather than the more fashionable natural rights as a basis for political order, or in his interpretation of theological accounts of incarnation and salvation, his insistence upon the reality of evil gave his writing a tension and a depth of consequence to MacKinnon himself as well as his readers.

It made his contribution more difficult to assimilate than those who could do passable imitations of his occasionally exaggerated syllables sometimes realised. For him it left his thinking and the written expression of it in more fragmented form than, I believe, he would have wished. He constantly stressed the importance of the particular and the individual and set his face against the possibility of the grand over-arching theory. He had absorbed the later Wittgenstein in part through John Wisdom. He saw the importance of the individual example, assembled with others as reminders; in the end he was more in sympathy with Aristotle than Plato, and quite centrally his Christology was based upon the historical particularity of the incarnation.

His most consistent attempt to articulate his central concerns is to be found in his Gifford Lectures of 1965 and 1966, published in 1974 under the title *The Problem of Metaphysics*. There, it is fair to say that it is the manner of the journey rather than the arrival which is the central contribution of this book, and the same may legitimately be said of the legacy of Donald MacKinnon. Thus there is no single MacKinnon contribution, and out of the plethora of insights and explorations I quote one, not as representing the total oeuvre, for my point is that that is not how MacKinnon worked, but rather as exemplifying the manner in which one pupil responds to his teacher:

> It is when one allows one's attention to fasten upon the sorts of exploration of the human reality that we have here reviewed that we come to recognise the paradox that, while in one way a proper respect for the irreducibility of the tragic inhibits metaphysical construction, in another the sort of commentary on human life, which one finds in the tragedies here reviewed and the parables analysed, makes one in the end discontented with any sort of naturalism. It is as if we are constrained in pondering the extremities of human life to acknowledge the transcendent as the only alternative to the kind of trivialisation which would empty of significance the sorts of experience with which we have been concerned. (*The Problem of Metaphysics*, p. 145.)

As will be evident from the foregoing, Donald MacKinnon neither sought nor expected the recognition of social or political elites. However, his election as a Fellow of the British Academy in 1978 gave him evident satisfaction and pleasure.

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